DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 458 CG 021 800

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TITLE Ego-Syntonic Aspects of Adult Play and Creativity.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; *Cognitive Processes; *Creativity; Parent Child Relationship; Parents; *Play; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Ego Syntonic State

ABSTRACT

Creativity research has traditionally regarded the creative process as involving a full or partial regression of the ego to a more primitive state of consciousness. An alternative interpretation involves an ego-syntonic concept. This developmental model of ego-syntonic play and its role in creativity is derived from a synergistic combination of concepts from psychoanalytic and Vygotskian paradigms. While some play and creative activities may be characterized by voluntary and/or involuntary regressions, an ego-syntonic state provides access to the unconscious imagination without a corresponding loss of ego functions. Moreover, when play and creativity become ego-syntonic activities, unconscious processes such as imagination become consciously directed and work in collaboration with normal ego functions such as logical thought. Three types of parent-child interactions can be identified that have implications for the types of play and creative processes found in adults. These are: (1) the parent who is critical of play, who does not encourage the child's exploration, expression, or fantasizing; (2) the parent who allows the child to play but does not offer direction; and (3) the parent who encourages the child to play, is tolerant of the child's mistakes and silliness, and even plays along with the child. The experiences of the ego-syntonic state may be maximized by the individual's learning how to use inner speech to evoke and monitor the cognitive processes and emotions involved in the ego-syntonic condition. (ABL)

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EGO-SYNTONIC ASPECTS OF ADULT PLAY AND CREATIVITY

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Ego-syntonic Aspects of Adult Play and Creativity

by Larry Smolucha and Francine Smolucha

July 19, 1989

Creativity research has traditionally regarded the creative process as involving a full or partial regression of the ego, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to a more primitive state of consciousness. This viewpoint implies that it is only through a regression of the personality to a more childlike condition that the creative processes can be given full reign. The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative interpretation of the psychodynamic processes involved in play and creativity in the adult and the child. In particular, the concept of creativity as an ego-syntonic process of play will be examined as an alternative to the idea of regression.

The developmental model of ego-syntonic play and its role in creativity is derived from a synergistic combination of concepts from psychoanalytic and Vygotskian paradigms. The ego-syntonic condition was described by Freud in 1915 as follows,

> ....Co-operation between a preconscious and an unconscious impulse, even when the latter is subject to very strong repression, may be established if the situation permits of the unconscious impulse operating in harmony with one of the controlling tendencies. The repression is removed for the occassion, the repressed activity being admitted as a reinforcement of the one intended by the ego. In respect of this single constellation the unconscious becomes ego-syntonic, falls into line with the ego, without any changes taking place in the repression otherwise. The effect of the Ucs in this co-operation is unmistakable; the reinforced tendencies reveal themselves as, in spite of all, different from the normal - they make possible achievements of special perfection, and they manifest a resistance in the face of opposition similar to that of obsessional symptoms (The Unconscious, p.141).

The condition which Freud describes, a co-operation between unconscious tendencies and the controlling ego when those unconscious tendencies serve the interests of the ego, embodies the basic principle of the ego-syntonic condition. In an ego-syntonic state, the needs of the ego, the id, and the superego are in mutual concordance, allowing a temporary suspension of the usual tensions among those three aspects of the personality. In such an ego-syntonic state, the adult personality would experience enjoyment and a sense of relaxed fulfillment during play that would be most conducive to the fullest expression of the individual's creativity. The subjective experience of an ego-syntonic state would be characterized by a sense of wholeness and exhuberance, as in Maslow s concept of the peak experience(1962), and Csikzentmihaly's concept of flow (1988). During the ego-syntonic state, the three formerly disparate aspects of the personality briefly find wholeness, unification, and mutual identification. When they again differentiate, the personality re-emerges transformed by the experience .

In the ego-syntonic state, the ego retains its function as monitor and director of activities, rather than yielding control to the id, as would be the case in regression. Previously unconscious processes and drives would surface but would not dominate the personality as in a regressive state. Even the concept of regression in service of

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the ego (Kris,1952), which is a voluntary regression, requires that the ego give up its control to the id. While some play and creative activities may be characterized by voluntary and/or involuntary regressions, an ego-syntonic state provides access to the unconscious imagination without a corresponding loss of ego functions. Moreover, when play and creativity become ego-syntonic activities, unconscious processes such as imagination become consciously directed and work in collaboration with normal ego functions such as logical thought.

In a state of regression one may feel loss of ego, self-consciousness, or absorption (Quarrick, 1989). In an ego-syntonic state, on the other hand, one would feel self-actualized. In the ego-syntonic state, in our interpretation, the superego functions in the role of nurturing parent and softens its critical appraisal of the personality's behavior thereby enhancing creative problem solving. The superego as nurturing parent would provide positive feedback to the ego concerning its ability to indulge itself in appropriate playful fantasy, or to be fiercely competitive in games of sport while still playing with a sense of honor. Ego-syntonic states of adult play and creativity require a maturation of the personality which begins in the play activities of the preschool years; adult creativity is a maturation of symbolic play. (Smoluch'a, 1985).

Although Freud made no mention of the superego in his 1915 quote [the model of the id, ego, and superego was not introduced until 1923] we believe a nurturing superego, which 'speaks' to the ego in an approving and supportive way, is essential to ego-syntonic play and creative imagination in adulthood. Vygotskian research on how inner speech comes to regulate elementary mental functions enhances our understanding of the formation of the superego and its role in self-regulation during ego-syntonic activities. The original models for the internalized voice of the adult's superego were the conversations that originally occurred between parent and child during preschool play (see Smolucha 1989).

Three types of parent-child interactions can be identified that have implications for the types of play and creative processes found in adults. The first type is the parent who is critical of play, who does not encourage the child's exploration, emotional expression, or fantasizing. As the child of such a parent matured, he would feel guilty about playing or indulging in recreational activities and his creative imagination would be inhibited by an overly critical attitude. When the ego was in control, the personality would be characterized by the repression of unconscious processes and drives. Being unable to achieve an ego-syntonic state, regression would be the only means for such an individual of accessing the imagination, satisfying cravings for sensual indulgence, or venting hostilities. The regression might be drug induced or spontaneous, but would be characterized by the loss of self-control.

The second type of parent allows the child to play but offers no direction. The child of this parent typically engages in sensorimotor play, seeking increasing levels of arousal. Typically this play becomes destructive as more and more action is required to produce more spectacular visual and auditory results. Lacking parental guidance, the child does not acquire the basic skills needed to engage in prolonged pretend play or co-operative play. As this child matured, he would indulge freely in thrill-seeking recreation but would not be able to direct his fantasy in a creative way. Some people who are able to perform regression in service of the ego may be of this type, being able to gain insights from their regressive experiences.

The third type of parent-child interaction is characterized by a supportive parental disposition. The parent encourages the child to play, is tolerant of the child's mistakes and his silliness, and even plays along with the child. Such a parent also gently imposes restrictions on the child's play, such as discouraging destructive behavior toward toys or other children. The child basks in the parent's admiration

when he has accomplished some interesting feat, done something novel, or has simply "played nicely'. This interaction sets the stage for ego-syntonic play and creative imagination in later adulthood. The adult counter-part of this child can indulge himself in either sensual or aggressive forms of recreation while still setting some limits for safety and sociability. Creative imagination is a source of pride for this individual and is utilized with facility, along with other thought process.

The ideal, third type of parent is rare. Many parents change their attitudes toward children's play during the child's middle childhood years, de-valuing play as they begin to extol the virtues of work. As a consequence, this produces an adult who has the potential to achieve ego-syntonic states, and may do so from time to time spontaneously, but the conflicting messages of the internalized parent inhibit the ability of the individual to enjoy the sense of relaxed fulfillment necessary for the development of creative fantasizing. These individuals may alternate between ego-syntonic states and regressive states without any clear understanding of, or sense of control over the processes involved.

The sense of harmony that the ego-syntonic state produces requires all three aspects of the personality to be in agreement; its very nature is, therefore, a fleeting phenomenon. However, the experience of the ego-syntonic state may be maximized by the individual's learning how to use inner speech to evoke and monitor the cognitive processes and emotions involved in the ego-syntonic condition.

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